THE BOY-ACTRESS IN ENGLAND

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"The quick comedians/Extemporally will stage us," Cleopatra predicts,

> and present
> Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
> Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
> Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
> I' the posture of a whore. (V, ii, 216–221)

It was, one feels certain, for no mere "squeaking" boy that Shakespeare wrote either this speech or the role in which it figures. In utilizing the boy-actresses of his acting company Shakespeare seems, indeed, to have shared the confidence of the Lord who, in the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, wants his page Bartholomew

> dressed in all suits like a lady . . .
> I know the boy will well usurp the grace,
> Voice, gait, and action of a gentlewoman. (Ind., I, 106; 131–132)

Indeed, the high level of acting quality in the boy-actresses assumed here and elsewhere by Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists raises some questions as to the validity of much modern thinking on this matter.

The art of feminine impersonation was practiced in the English theatre not only up to the closing of the theatres in 1642 but also for a short period after the re-opening of the theatres in 1665 as well. That the art was so practiced is, of course, everywhere acknowledged. However, much historical and critical writing has tended to minimize the artistic

value of that art; there has been embarrassment mingled with wonder that so many great playwrights should have found it possible to employ male actors in female roles. It is, however, likely that the capacities and abilities of these male actresses have been underestimated or, at any rate, misunderstood. This paper has, therefore, been undertaken as an attempt to explore something of the aesthetics of female impersonation as practiced in the English theatre. Such a study must include not only a consideration of the level of skill presumably attained but also the theatrical conditions which made it possible to achieve that level.

Boy actors played a prominent part in the development of the English drama over a long period. Companies composed entirely of boys developed in two divisions, those built around a nucleus of choirboys, such as those of the Chapel Royal, St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Royal Chapel at Windsor, and those composed of boys attending certain public schools, such as Eton, Westminster, and the Merchant Taylors' school. The choirboy-actors had been, of course, primarily chosen for their voices; they were thereafter so thoroughly trained in music and acting that " for a limited period the children of the Chapel Royal and of St. Paul's choir attained the status of professional actors." On the other hand, the boy-actors of the public schools were more amateur in standing, deriving " their impulse towards acting from some person, usually one of their masters, who happened to be interested in the drama."[1] Taken as a whole, however, the boy-actors were so proficient and attracted such good playwrights that they led the way until, at long last, the adult professionals were able to forge ahead after the building of the first permanent theatres in 1576.

The children's companies were, indeed, so successful that they were a frequent object of Puritan attacks. " Plaies will never be suppresst," mourned one pamphlet of 1569, *The Children of the Chapel Stript and Whipt*, " while her majesties unfledged minions flaunt it in silkes and sattens. They had as well be at their Popish service, in the devil's gar-

[1] Rev. J. Arbuthnot Nairn, " Boy-Actors Under the Tudors and Stewarts," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature*, Second Series, XXXII (1914), 62.

ments. . . . Even in her majesties chapel do these pretty upstart youths profane the Lordes Day by the lascivious writhing of their tender limbs, and gorgeous decking of their apparell, in feigning bawdie fables gathered from the idolatrous heathen poets."[1]

Despite a multitude of such attacks, however, " the sixty-five years between 1515 and 1580 belong to the children of the Elizabethan theatre."[2]

These boy-companies tended to specialize in a certain type of play best suited to their talents, ' with songs and dances, mythological persons and plots, many female parts, and with a lively and witty dialogue."[3] Before 1580, however, H. N. Hillebrand has insisted that " practically no distinction can be traced between the work of children and of men " —" they produced the same kinds of plays,"[4] although the boy-actors " seem rarely or never to have ventured anything serious like *Gorboduc*." Even this last reservation is not serious, for " the tendencies of the day were nearly always towards farce and morality " anyway and so " directly favored the talent of the children." At any rate, " the obvious limitations of the young actors were reflected in no vital respect in any of their plays," although it was perhaps also true, to look at the opposite face of the coin, that " there was nothing in the average play of the period which transcended the abilities of a boy of twelve."[5]

The plays of John Lyly constitute something of an exception to these observations, however. Of them, and of practically no other body of plays, Hillebrand could say, " These were written for children and could have been written for none but them. . . . His plays required not acting which was vivid or powerful, or even true to life, but the kind of stage presence which delivered the lines with clarity and point and which possessed the cardinal virtue of vivacity. These qualities

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[1] Quoted by E. K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage* (Oxford, 1923), II, 34–35.

[2] Harold Newcomb Hillebrand, " The Child Actors, a Chapter in Elizabethan Stage History," *University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, XI (1926), 254.

[3] Ashley H. Thorndike, *Shakespeare's Theater* (New York, 1916), p. 370.

[4] Hillebrand, pp. 253–254.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 258–261.

the children had in greater degree than the men, for their shrill, well trained voices could launch the speeches with just the piquancy that was needed, and their pert and graceful bearing would show off to the fullest advantage the mischievous pages. . . . The children had, in short, just what the plays needed—charm and vivacity. And most fortunately for Lyly, their very inability to portray passion or any deep emotion agreed with the same notable lack in their dramatist."[1]

After 1576 the boy-companies declined both in popularity and in quality for approximately two decades " in spite of the new impulse given . . . by the activity as a playwright of John Lyly."[2] When, especially after 1590, the Elizabethan drama took a new direction in the hands of men such as Greene, Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, the boy-companies could not follow " where the drama was leading "[3] and so declined. They remained in eclipse until, in 1599, the boy-company at St. Paul's was revived, and, in the following year, the company at the Chapel Royal reappeared. For approximately a decade thereafter these boy-companies again enjoyed a great vogue, attracting by their novelty and imitating such aspects of the contemporary adult drama as they found most adaptable. They did more than slavishly imitate, however, for they also presented plays in which they " dared to go further than men in their satirical attacks because their youth gave them a fancied immunity, ' a privilege for railing.' "[4] Nevertheless, this second great period had also passed by 1615. These companies had " suffered from the wearing off of novelty, from the tendency of boys to grow older," and " from the plague-seasons of 1603–4 and 1608–9."[5]

The artistic problems presented by the children's companies, in which boys or young men acted all of the roles, differed, however, from those presented by the use, in the adult companies, of such boys or young men to act only the feminine roles. Throughout the years where-

[1] Hillebrand, pp. 262–263.
[2] Chambers, II, 5.
[3] Hillebrand, p. 264.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 268–270.
[5] Chambers, II, 7.

in the boy-companies flourished and withered, and then flourished and withered once more, boy-actresses were always figuring in the organization of the professional companies of adult actors. They were, in fact, like their counterparts in the boy-companies, a special target of Puritan reformers. The Puritans here based their onslaught on the Biblical injunction against either men or women wearing the clothes of the opposite sex. Apologists for the boy-actresses could, however, join Thomas Heywood in disclaiming any "sinister intent whatsoever" and in asking: "To see our youths attired in the habit of women, who knowes not what their intents be? who cannot distinguish them by their names, assuredly knowing they are but to represent such a lady, at such a time appoynted."[1] A more positive retort to this criticism was that of Thomas Nashe, who boasted in 1592 that the players of his time were "not as the players beyond the sea, a sort of squirting bawdie comedians, that have whores and common curtizans to play women's parts."[2]

The earliest troupes of players seem to have had four members, with the female parts allotted to the slightest of the four. As the companies developed, however, such feminine parts were assigned to an apprentice of the company[3] until each company came to have two or three apprentices to take the parts of women or pages. The plays written for this type of acting-company reflected their membership closely, needless to say. "The typical play," T. W. Baldwin found, for instance, "seems to have been constructed for eight principal characters, six men and two women, or five men and three women . . . members took the parts of men, almost never those of women. . . . The parts of women are practically always taken by apprentices, who may occasionally have been permitted minor men's parts toward the end of their apprenticeship."[4]

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[1] Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (London, The Shakespeare Society, 1841), p. 28.

[2] Quoted by Edmond Malone, ed., *The Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare* (London, 1821), III, 118.

[3] Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York, 1952), p. 9.

[4] Thomas Whitfield Baldwin, *The Organization and Personnel of the Shakespearean Company* (Princeton, 1927), pp. 175–176.

As this system of apprentice training developed, the playwrights came to write longer, deeper, more complex parts for women characters to correspond to what must have been the increasing skill of their boy-actresses. It has been noted, for example, that Marlowe " wrote no long parts for women and even Lyly . . . put little emotional stress into the lines for his ladies, nymphs, and goddesses."[1] Within the series of plays by Shakespeare, however, many critics have been able to trace a clear development toward greater complexity in the women's parts. Henry David Gray, for instance, noted that within the series of tragedies from *Julius Caesar* onward, the heroine " is increasingly important in the part she takes in the action with each new play, and is therefore more and more the center of interest."[2] Indeed, Mr. Gray felt that within the *Hamlet* to *Coriolanus* series the heroines were not only increasingly more complex but also progressively older, thus presumably closely reflecting the increasing age as well as the increasing skill of the apprentices assigned the feminine parts.[3] W. Robertson Davies has found a similar progression among the heroines of Shakespeare's romantic comedies.[4]

The boy-actors, whether acting male roles in the children's companies or female roles in the adult companies, met their challenge well. Professor Wallace could, indeed, conclude after an extensive study of the history of English boy-companies that the famous passage in *Hamlet* so often taken to detract from the artistry of the very successful boy competitors of the actors at the Globe in reality contains no detraction at all. " It is not they, but the manner of their establishment and support that is objectionable. . . . It would be not only false, but would kill Shakespeare's own point, for him to say the acting was bad. The whole history of the Boys shows it was good. . . . The rivalry is not with inferior children-actors, but with a company of boys whose unquestioned

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[1] Thorndike, p. 388.

[2] Henry David Gray, " The Evolution of Shakespeare's Heroine," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XII (1913), 127.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

[4] W. Robertson Davies, *Shakespeare's Boy Actors* (London, 1939), pp. 66–68.

brilliance receives the generous applause of the most select and judicial audiences of London."[1]

The ability of the boy-actresses in particular may be inferred, at least in part, not only from the growth in the variety and length of women's parts noted by, for instance, Professor Thorndike[2] but also from the concomitant fact that the actual shareholders of Elizabethan acting companies " took the parts of men, almost never those of women." Davies, it is true, believed that the parts of old women in general, and of comic old women in particular, must have been played by adult males. "As parts to act," he insisted, roles such as that of Juliet's nurse " are unsuitable for boys; there is a rich unction about them only found in mature comedians."[3] However, the only known instance in which a definite feminine part can be assigned a shareholder is the appearance of John Shank as Petella in the *Wild Goose Chase* revival of 1632, and that was a silent part and was most probably an opportunity for clowning in the *Charley's Aunt* vein. As a rule, the leaders of the acting companies seem to have felt that the women's parts were being well handled by the younger men and the boys.

We also have more direct evidence of the artistry and theatrical effectiveness of the impersonators of women. Thomas Heywood, in his *Apology of Actors* of 1612, reported an incident which occurred when the players of the Earl of Sussex performed the story of a woman " who, insatiably doting on a yong gentleman, (the more securely to enjoy his affection) mischievously and secreetly murdered her husband, whose ghost haunted her." When, in the play, the ghost stood before this murderess " in most horrid and feareful " shape, " a towne's-woman (till then of good estimation and report) finding her conscience (at this presentment) extremely troubled, suddenly skritched and cryd out " and, " un-urged," admitted the posioning of her own husband some seven years previously.[4]

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[1] Charles William Wallace, " The Children of the Chapel at Blackfriars, 1597–1603." *University Studies of the University of Nebraska*, VIII (April–July, 1908), 176–177.

[2] Thorndike, p. 388.

[3] Davies, p. 153.

[4] Heywood, pp. 57–58.

This strong reaction might not, of course, have been due solely to the ability of the boy impersonating the murderess. More decisive evidence was that given in 1611 by Thomas Coryat, who, while visiting Venice, was taken to see a comedy and there " saw women acte, a thing that I never saw before . . . , and they performed with as good a grace, action, gesture, and whatsoever convenient for a Player, as ever I saw any masculine Actor."[1] Coryat's wonder that women should have been able to play women's parts as well as men is surely indicative that the " masculine actors " of England were excellent. In addition, there has quite recently come to light an account of a performance of *Othello* at Oxford in 1615, after which a correspondent wrote that " Desdemona, killed by her husband, in her death moved us especially when, as she lay in her bed, her face alone implored the pity of the audience."[2] Whether or not this report is sufficient in itself to undermine completely the formalistic view of Elizabethan acting, as Mr. Rosenberg believed, is open to question. It certainly does indicate, however, that, to some extent at least, " the players added to the lines their own creative art of interpretative physical movement and speech." Although " this was the great Burbage's own company, what most touched the observer was the power of the actor playing the heroine to convey emotion, simply through facial expression."[3]

The art of one boy-actress, Richard Robinson, was even publicly attested to by none other than Ben Jonson. In the second act of his *The Devil is an Ass* of 1616 Jonson had Mere-Craft and Ingine discuss their need for a " witty boy " to act the part of a Lady for them. Ingine suggests " one o' the players " and then mentions particularly

> *Dicke Robinson,*
> A very pretty fellow, and comes often
> To a Gentlemans chamber, a friends of mine. We had

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[1] Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* (Glasgow, 1905), I, 386.

[2] Geoffrey Tillotson, " ' Othello ' and ' The Alchemist ' at Oxford in 1610, " *TLS*, July 20, 1933, p. 444.

[3] Marvin Rosenberg, " Elizabethan Actors : Men or Marionettes? " *PMLA*, LXIX (September, 1954), 918.

The merriest supper it there, one night,
The Gentlemans Lady-lady invited him
To'a Gossips feast. Now, he, Sir, brought *Dick Robinson*,
Drest like a Lawyers wife, amongst 'hem all;
(I lent him cloathes) but, to see him behave it;
And lay the law; and carve; and drinke unto 'hem;
And then talke baudy; and send frolicks! o!
It would have burst your buttons, or not left you
A seame.
MERE-CRAFT. They say hee's an ingenious youth!
INGINE. O Sir! and dresses himselfe, the best! beyond
Forty o' your very *Ladies*. (II, viii, 64–77)

Although Professor Harbage would have us remember that this ability of Robinson's to " pass as a woman off the stage " is " off the stage *on the stage*,"[1] Jonson's tribute nevertheless remains, as Professor Bentley maintains, " no small tribute."[2]

The artistic ability and emotional power of English impersonators of women is also attested to by early Restoration observers. On October 11, 1660, two months before the first English actress appeared professionally on a public stage, Samuel Pepys was taken by Mr. Salisbury " to the Cockpit to see ' The Moor of Venice.' " While he was there " a very pretty lady " that sat by him " called out, to see Desdemona smothered."[3] Indeed, Downes spoke of three men—Mr. James Nokes, Mr. Angel, and Mr. William Betterton—who acted feminine roles at the Cockpit, Drury Lane, in 1659, in a manner " very acceptable to the Audience," while " Mosely and Floid commonly Acted the Part of a Bawd and Whore."[4]

The greatest post-Restoration male-actress was, however, Edward Kynaston, of whom Pepys reported in January, 1660/1, when Kynaston was at least twenty, that in the course of his appearance in " three shapes " in a revival of Jonson's *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman*, Kynaston

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[1] Alfred Harbage, " Elizabethan Acting," *PMLA*, LIV (September, 1939) 691n.

[2] Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage* (Oxford, 1941), II, 550–553. Professor Baldwin estimates Robinson's age in 1616 at twenty. Baldwin, pp. 224–225.

[3] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London, 1906), II, 100.

[4] John Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus*, ed. Montague Summers (London, 1928), p. 19.

was not only " the handsomest man in the house " but also " the prettiest woman in the whole house."[1] Similarly, the previous August, after seeing Kynaston as the Duke's sister, Olympia, in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Loyal Subject*, Pepys had written that Kynaston " made the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life."[2] Kynaston was, according to Downes, " a Compleat Female Stage Beauty, performing his Parts so well, especially Arthiope and Aglaura, being Parts greatly moving Compassion and Pity; that it has since been Disputable among the Judicious, whether any Woman that succeeded him so Sensibly touch'd the Audience as he."[3] This was also the Kynaston of whom Colley Cibber wrote that he " was so beautiful a youth, that the ladies of quality prided themselves in taking him with them in their coaches to Hyde Park, in his theatrical habit, after the play."[4]

From whence did this high level of achievement come? Any investigation into the wellsprings of the English form of the art of feminine impersonation must begin with some inquiry into the general nature of English acting before 1665, commonly loosely termed " Elizabethan acting." Unfortunately, there exists today great, almost passionate disagreement as to the nature of that acting. Although, as Alfred Harbage remarked, " there is extant not a single piece of analytical description of Elizabethan acting in general, or of an Elizabethan actor in a particular role,"[5] scholars, undeterred, have yet attempted to build up, out of hints drawn from hither and yon, a picture of what that acting was like. Having thus built up a theory out of what must necessarily be only shreds and patches, some scholars have undoubtedly been too positive regarding the validity of their interpretation of the data. Miss Bradbrook, for instance, spoke of " a general consensus of opinion on Elizabethan acting. There would be comparatively little business, and gesture would

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[1] Pepys, I, 22.

[2] Pepys, I. 90.

[3] Downes, p. 19.

[4] Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, ed. Edmund Bellchambers (London, 1822), p. 123.

[5] Harbage, " Elizabethan Acting," 693.

be formalized. Conventional movement and heightened delivery would be necessary to carry off the dramatic illusion."[1] Not only did Miss Bradbrook here discover a "general consensus of opinion" where there is none in fact, but in another of her books she carried her investigations further, considered instances of strutting, face-making, and facial distortions deducible from the text or from the stage directions, and thereupon rather rashly concluded that what was probably true of specific instances must necessarily have been true of Elizabethan acting in general. She thought it possible, for instance, to discover that during long speeches by one character the other actors "would remain stiffly grouped." Calling attention to possible spectators on the stage and to the fact that the acting was done in broad daylight and in the open air, she insisted that "To maintain attention it would be necessary to exaggerate movement or statuesqueness, to use inflated delivery and conventional posture . . . the acting was probably nearer to that of the modern political platform or revivalist pulpit than that of the modern stage."[2]

Miss Bradbrook was, moreover, supported in her theories by men such as Alfred Harbage, who held that "such stage directions as may be read literally describe acting safely within the formal frame. Characters wring their hands to denote anguish, throw themselves on the ground to denote grief, enter reading a book to denote pensiveness."[3] Others have even gone much further than either Miss Bradbrook or Mr. Harbage in finding formalism in Elizabethan acting. B. L. Joseph, for instance, attempted to establish a very close relationship between that acting and formal rhetoric, basing much of his argument on manuals for students of public speaking which enjoined specific gestures for the expression of specific emotions and ideas. It was Mr. Joseph's opinion that "all the evidence goes to show that rhetorical acting on the stage was conducted according to an accepted body of rules. The actor's

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[1] Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Elizabethan Stage Conditions* (Cambridge, 1932), p. 109.

[2] Muriel C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 20–21.

[3] Harbage, "Elizabethan Acting," 697.

function was not to 'create,' but to perform. He was to use his voice and body to give life to the text. . . . In the theatre, as in the study, the poet's words are all that count. From them alone is it possible to create his play over again."[1] Indeed, this postulating of acting according to definite, inflexible rules led Mr. Joseph to assume that the Elizabethan actor was little more than an automaton. He believed, for example, that "an actor who had been trained in this style, and who knew how to pronounce the literary text, would automatically create upon the stage the kind of person imagined by the dramatist at any particular moment."[2]

This extreme formalism has, to be sure, not found universal acceptance, but it has perhaps been unduly influential nevertheless. S. L. Bethell, for instance, writing when the Joseph book was still in manuscript form, believed that Elizabethan acting was "fundamentally formal" although it, "like the drama itself, was in a mixture of styles." He thought it likely that "(a) the longer verse passages were delivered as formal rhetoric. . . . (b) This rhetorical manner was presumably shaded off into something more like naturalism in the shorter exchanges of dialogue and in conversational prose. . . . (c) Clowning would be non-naturalistic. . . . And (d) a great deal of vaudeville was also in use. Because no one had thought of naturalism . . . , these different modes did not stand out as different; they shaded into one another quite naturally. And the audience accepted the performance on many different planes. . . . "[3] Despite his belief in the acting system containing a variety of styles, however, Bethell nevertheless thought of the actors, after having been highly trained, "especially in the technique of verse-speaking," as having been "fairly reliable instruments (in the serious roles at least) without the additions of 'personality' and 'creativity' demanded today." The true artist of the art of acting is, to Mr. Bethell, one who serves only as an instrument in the hands of the

[1] B. L. Joseph, *Elizabethan Acting* (London, 1951), p. 153.

[2] Joseph, p. 111.

[3] S. L. Bethell, "Shakespeare's Actors," *RES*, I, New Series, No. 3 (July, 1950), 204–05.

author, and the Elizabethan actor was just such an instrument. "The modern interpretative acting, in which A's *Hamlet* differs *toto caelo* from B's, is only one symptom of a general disease. This is an age of virtuosi —or perhaps of showmen—not of artists. It is an age of orchestral conductors who impose their meaning upon the work. The Elizabethans were soaked in music but among them the conductor was unknown and the composer got his chance."[1]

Such a concept of acting most probably over-emphasizes the formalistic elements, however. Although such formalism can be found in other theatrical traditions, it is yet so very different from the mainstream of English theatrical practice since we have records of the acting methods that one may well suspect it of being more the product of scholarly theorizing than of practical theatrical experience. Some such variety of acting styles as Mr. Bethell himself has suggested, corresponding to an evident variety in types of scenes, must surely have been the case.

Nevertheless, there must have been more emphasis on the formal elements of acting in the Elizabethan than in the twentieth century theatre. The practical considerations of a repertoire system presenting, in large measure and in quick succession, newly-written plays, might alone well have necessitated some such formalism, "for in a theatre where new plays were constantly being presented there would be little time to do more than learn the words of a part and have a few rehearsals, which would give slight opportunity for elaborate training in individual roles. The actor had to have his gestures at his command so that he could produce those which were appropriate without too much reflection."[2] Admittedly, when the Elizabethan actors toured in Germany the Germans "were impressed by the English naturalistic style of acting and the complete absorption of each actor in his part," as J. Issacs has noted,[3] but this enthusiasm may well have been the result of a style of acting which merely seemed more "naturalistic" to the Germans

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[1] Bethell, 205.

[2] Davies, p. 31.

[3] J. Issacs, "Shakespeare as Man of the Theatre," *Shakespeare and The Theatre: A Series of Papers by Members of the Shakespeare Association* (London, 1927), p. 93.

of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; it would very probably seem much less "naturalistic" to those familiar with, for example, twentieth-century acting methods. After all, it is rather safe to say that neither the Elizabethan actor, "his audience, nor his age was interested in psychological presentation."[1] Similarly, although Mr. Issacs has correctly noted that "delicacy of acting can be amply and wonderfully proved from Shakespeare," this delicacy of acting is most probably to be understood as having been achieved within a fundamentally formalistic tradition. Mr. Issacs himself, for instance, wrote that "We can be certain that Elizabethan acting was bolder than now, that speech was much quicker, that gesture was wilder, that bodily movements were more actorish."[2]

More significant for our present purposes, some such assumption of at least a large proportion of formalism is probably necessary in accounting for the long-continued success of males in the portrayal of women. The artistry of the boy-actresses must surely have been more extensive than that postulated by such a man as H. N. Hillebrand, who saw the boy-actors of the Elizabethan period as bringing to the theatre "no illusion" but only "the whimsical charm of a masquerade"—"the charm of piquant strangeness and the genuine charm of delightful music, nimble dancing, the vivacity of rattling comedy," and "often precocious skill." Conceiving of the boy-companies' being forced to work within a narrow aesthetic range, Hillebrand thought that they specialized in comedy because "all that agility, audacity, grace, and pertness can bring to the stage belonged to these boys, and these are the graces of comedy." Even then, however, he insisted that they rarely performed what he termed "serious or romantic comedies" but rather concentrated on those which were "farcical, cynical, and satiric," and thus within their supposedly limited powers. Accordingly, they did much less well in serious or tragic plays; Hillebrand saw in the tragedies which, for example, Marston and Chapman wrote for the boy-

[1] Baldwin, pp. 305–306.

[2] Issacs, pp. 98–99.

companies, plays like *Sophonisba* and even *Bussy D'Ambois*, only " 'children's tragedy,' just as truly as Lyly's plays a decade before had been 'children's comedy.' "[1] As a result of all of these opinions, Hillebrand concluded that enjoyment of boy-companies, which included both those boys imitating men and those imitating women, was dependent upon qualities which he saw the Elizabethan playgoer as sharing with those Italian laborers who today enjoy puppets: " keen appetite for drama of all kinds, critical sense which demands little and is satisfied with little, and the familiarizing effect of a long tradition. Without these three aids, child actors, like marionettes, cease to be a living force in art and become a fad."[2]

In so writing, however, Hillebrand has, if nothing else, obviously underestimated—or at least misunderstood—the artistic values of first-rate puppet work, enjoyment of which is certainly not dependent upon " a critical sense which demands little and is satisfied with little." He can, therefore, probably be said to have underestimated—or misunderstood—the artistic values of the boy-actors as well. Professor Harbage, for one, finds this ascription to the boy-actors of only a " whimsical charm " a very insufficient explanation of " a vogue that endured so long and was ended principally by the difficulty of keeping talented boys from growing up "; moreover, he felt, it leaves " *unexplained* the success of the boys in the adult companies."[3] Although Harbage had a much higher opinion than Hillebrand of the plays performed by the boy-companies, he remarked on the fact that, at any rate, simultaneously with the greatest success of the boy-companies, in the 1600–1610 decade, " boys were considered capable of performing tragic roles even side by side with adult actors," as " evidenced by Cleopatra, Desdemona, the Duchess of Malfi, and numerous other important feminine characters in Elizabethan tragedies." Progressing from a common-sense view that Elizabethan boys, like boys of other times and other places, must have been incapable of consistently succeeding in the " imaginative-inter-

[1] Hillebrand, 271–273.

[2] *Ibid.*, 274–275.

[3] Harbage, " Elizabethan Acting," 703.

pretation" of adult roles, Harbage went on to find in formal acting the only explanation possible for him. "In formal acting, as distinct from natural acting ('imaginative interpretation'), boys could successfully compete."[1] Without going to Harbage's extreme of regarding both the adult and child actors as somewhat glorified puppets, one may yet find in some degree of formalism the probable artistic means by which the boy-actors were enabled to succeed.

There has, however, been an unfortunate tendency on the part of the advocates of formal Elizabethan acting to feel that somehow formal acting made things appreciably easier for the boys. This is most probably a mis-apprehension, for formal acting actually cannot be said to be easier to master completely than naturalistic acting. Even if the boy-actresses could count on a quicker audience acceptance of them as women, for example, because of certain conventions implicit in formal acting, this would not, after all, make their acting task *per se* any simpler. It is probably not wholly accidental that those theatrical traditions which place the greatest emphasis on convention and formality, such traditions as, for example, that of the Comedie-Francaise or that of Kabuki, are those traditions which also place the greatest premium on age and experience. Children are, it is true, often given small roles in Kabuki when they are four or five, but it is at least a decade later before they can be said to have reached even a moderate degree of real proficiency. There is more to formal acting than the acquisition of a vocabulary of stylized gestures, a fact which Mr. Joseph, for instance, tended to forget. Once the vocabulary is learned, it must be infused with significance. Mr. Davies has concluded in his study, *Shakespeare's Boy Actors*, that Shakespeare's feminine roles "demand technical ability of the very first order, and beyond that, nothing but ease of manner."[2] The over-all tendency of his study was to emphasize Shakespeare's accommodation of parts to his actors and so to emphasize this "ease of manner," but it should be remembered that it was, after all, no small feat for the boy-

[1] *Ibid.*, 702–703.

[2] Davies, p. 43.

actresses to have mastered that " technical ability of the very first order " which Mr. Davies, perhaps unintentionally, tended to minimize unduly.

This is not to deny, however, that boy-actresses did have certain advantages over any fully mature men who might attempt their parts. For one thing, their fragile physiques would help them. Even Harley Granville-Barker, after all, who felt that a boy could bring to Juliet, Rosalind, or Cleopatra only " grace of manner and charm of speech " and that " a boy Juliet . . . would seem an odd fish to us," yet himself admitted that nothing but the name on a modern program might reveal to the audience that it was indeed a boy acting Juliet.[1] Walter Raleigh even saw an advantage in the boys' very immaturity, for, highly trained and amenable to instruction, they may well, he thought, have rendered parts such as Rosalind and Desdemona " with a clarity and simplicity which served as a transparent medium for the author's wit and pathos "; in contrast, Raleigh felt that the modern actress brings to her parts too often " a realism and a robust emotion which sometimes obscures the sheer poetic values of the author's conception."[2]

Another major factor in the success of the boy-actresses was undoubtedly the training which they received as members of a repertory acting-company which was fully professional. They had also the advantage of, in many cases, working directly with the playwright. For " the first three or four years " of their apprenticeship, Professor Baldwin believed, " the students did odd jobs, such as placing chairs properly; and took small parts,"[3] growing gradually into the major feminine roles and then continuing to act in those roles for a period of several years at least. Clever boys must, therefore, have been able to perfect their acting of feminine parts by their long access to the corporate wealth of acting experience and advice at their disposal.

The accomplishment of the boys was also undoubtedly aided by what Davies has termed the fact that " it was not then fashionable for youth

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[1] Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare, First Series* (London, 1933), p. xxvii.

[2] Walter Raleigh, *Shakespeare* (London, 1950), p. 120.

[3] Baldwin, p. 293.

to be a period of ignorance and ineptitude."[1] In addition, Marchette Chute has pointed out that

> . . . a Renaissance boy was not brought up in the least like a modern one. The average man of Shakespeare's day did not consider it effeminate to write poetry or play the lute or load himself with jewels and silks and perfumes. Shakespeare's Rosalind was speaking for the normal Renaissance point of view when she said she would be 'changeable, longing and liking . . . full of tears, full of smiles . . . as boys and women are.' It was not until the Puritan Commonwealth that the convention was established that men were supposed to have an entirely different life to women and many of a boy's natural qualities were choked out of him as 'unmanly.' The situation was different in Shakespeare's day, and the boys of his company understood perfectly what moved a young girl to laughter or to tears.[2]

No doubt, too, the task of the boy-actress was smoothed from time to time by the playwrights. Ashley Thorndike has pointed out, for instance, that although female parts were often numerous in plays written for boy-companies, in plays for adult companies "there are rarely more than two of any length. The length is indeed much restricted, Shakespeare's heroines being much less talkative than his heroes."[3] In somewhat this same vein, Harley Granville-Barker remarked on what he took to be

> . . . Shakespeare's constant care to demand nothing of a boy-actress that might turn to unseemliness or ridicule. He had not much taste for what is called 'domestic drama,' nor does he dose us very heavily with Doll Tearsheet, Mistress Overdone, and their like. Constance mourns Arthur's loss, Lady Macduff has her little son, but no mother croons over the child in her arms. Pauline brings Hermione's baby to Leontes, it is true; but see with what tact, from this point of view, the episode is managed. And love scenes are most carefully contrived. Romeo and Juliet are seldom alone together; never for long, but in the balcony scene; and in this . . . they are kept from all contact with each other. Consider *Antony and Cleopatra*. Here is a tragedy of sex without one single scene of sexual appeal. That aspect of Cleopatra is reflected for us in talk about her.[4]

Similarly, W. Robertson Davies has devoted almost all of his book

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[1] Davies, p. 25.

[2] Marchette Chute, *Shakespeare of London* (New York, 1949), p. 160.

[3] Thorndike, p. 371.

[4] Granville-Barker, p. xxviii.

to an examination of the " subtle and elusive "[1] means by which Shakespeare seems to have accommodated his feminine roles to the boy-actresses. Davies, noting that " the great artist turns to account the very limitations of his medium,"[2] insisted in the key paragraph of his study that

> The boys had superficial emotion in plenty, and that over a surprising range, but on the stage, as in all arts, experience of life gives depth and understanding to the artists' work, and superficial emotion is not enough to make an actor of first-rate ability. The object of this study is to demonstrate the way in which the Shakespearian women's roles are written to exploit fully the capacity of the boy actors for easy and febrile emotion without demanding the greater range of passion which only time and experience can bring.[3]

Specifically, Davies remarked, for example, on " how many of the scenes in which women appear in prominent roles are cast in the formal mould " and how the boy-actress was thereby " given the advantage of that aloofness which very mannered acting engenders whether in comedy or tragedy."[4]

The fact remains, however, that even the part played by the playwright in minimizing the difficulties can easily be over-estimated. Granville-Barker's belief that there was a definite, deliberate accommodation on Shakespeare's part in order to avoid physical love-making may serve as an example. Even if Romeo and Juliet are " seldom alone together," they are yet alone together on occasion. Similarly, if there is time for only one embrace when Antony is brought, dying, to Cleopatra, there is yet time for that one embrace. The necessity of convincing the audience remained, however briefness might have aided the illusion. Moreover, Granville-Barker went on to write of his opinion that " Shakespeare, artist that he was, turned this limitation to account, made loss into a gain. Feminine charm—of which the modern stage makes such capital —was a medium denied him. So his men and women encounter upon

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[1] Davies, p. 41.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 198.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 27.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

a plane where their relation is made rarer and intenser by poetry, or enfranchised in a humour which surpasses more primitive love-making."[1]

Such ideas are open to criticism at several points. Davies has insisted, for example, that "it is simply not true . . . that Shakespeare's plays, as performed in his day, were scamped as regards the presentation of physical love-making."[2] Moreover, whatever Shakespeare's practice, Granville-Barker certainly erred in effect because his remarks omitted to take into account the fact that other, less gifted playwrights wrote the bulk of Elizabethan drama and they either could not or would not aid the boy-actresses by lifting their plays to so rarefied and non-physical a plane. One thinks, for instance, of the extended dallying indulged in by the Duchess of Malfi and her Antonio. "Elizabethan drama has plenty of scenes in which a certain amount of physical love-making must be introduced to give life to the verse," Davies wrote. "Audiences have always, and quite rightly and understandably, been interested in love-scenes, and will not continually be fobbed off with poetry, however great it is. Audiences will accept a great deal of shadow but they demand a little substance as well."[3]

Whatever advantages the boy-actresses may have garnered from their physique, their training, and their playwrights, it must be remembered that the acting skill required of them was, at the very least, formidable. "Consider, for instance, the tremendous challenge Shakespeare presented to some boy acor with the role of Cleopatra. She is a queen, and speaks like a queen to Caesar; with Antony she is amorous, coy, dignified, furious, but always the great paramour; alone with her maidens, and especially in the . . . scenes when she scolds the messenger for bringing news of Antony's marriage, and then forgives him because of his report of Octavia's ugliness, she is simply and wonderfully a woman. Shakespeare had to depend on the actor, who played so many parts in one, to communicate through the lines a continuous personality in which all the changing moods could seem natural and

[1] Granville-Barker, p. xxix.

[2] Davies, p. 185.

[3] *Ibid.*

plausible."[1]

It is true that not all observers have agreed that the part of Cleopatra is so very challenging. Davies, for instance, thought it " well within the technical and emotional scope of a boy actor of sixteen or seventeen years."[2] Even Davies, however, recognized that some parts were exceedingly demanding. However the difficulties of the roles of Cleopatra, Rosalind, Lady Macbeth, and so on might have been minimized according to the principles which he saw at work, Davies in turn called attention to the parts of Ariel and Puck. In them, he wrote, " Shakespeare puts the heaviest demands upon his boy actors . . . that such parts should have been written for them is a remarkable testimony to the excellence of their art."[3]

In connection with the difficulties of the parts written for the boy-actresses, Miss Bradbrook has written several illuminating paragraphs. Although " Shakespeare could not hope to get naturalistic acting from them," he yet, for example, " wrote his most delicate verse for them, even in the period when he was mainly interested in developing his prose; there is nothing in *Twelfth Night* as subtle as some of the speeches of Viola."[4] The aesthetic problems connected with the boy-actresses are more complicated than is often thought, she remarked. Although the frequent Elizabethan use of the theatrical device of a girl disguising herself as a boy has usually been taken as a means of minimizing the awkwardness thought inevitable in boy-actresses and as nothing more, Miss Bradbrook pointed out that " this could not have been a determining factor with the writer who created Beatrice," much less Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cleopatra. Further, she remarked that

> . . . the boy's clothes are . . . no mere masquerade; they provide a second dramatic identity which is superimposed upon the first, and interlaces with it. When Shakespeare puts his heroines into page's wearing, the two roles are sharply contrasted, giving an effect like shot silk, as the boyish wit or the feminine sensi-

[1] Rosenberg, 926.
[2] Davies, p. 132.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 171.
[4] Bradbrook, *Stage Conditions*, pp. 113–114.

bility predominates. Both must be sustained, and this calls for acting as subtle as the professional fool's, when under the stalking horse of 'natural' folly he shoots his shafts of wit.

The paradoxical quality of the 'disguise' in both the fools' and the pages' parts is that it enlarges the original role, and also discovers its latent possibilities.[1]

This paradoxical quality was, indeed, openly recognized at times, as when in the Epilogue to *As You Like It*, Rosalind flirts, "I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me."[2] On the other hand, "when the boy Cleopatra parodied his own 'squeaking' greatness," Miss Bradbrook wrote, "he must have spoken with especial mellifluousness: it was a positive challenge to the audience to detach themselves if they could."[3]

In short, however they might have accommodated their text either to hide the defects or to display the talents of their boy-actresses—and the extent of this accommodation has probably been over-estimated, the English playwrights before 1660 yet wrote a great body of feminine roles which demanded a great deal of assistance from the boy-actresses assigned to interpret them. The boys must have been equal to their assignment. Shakespeare, for instance, felt free to launch his boy-actress "in broad daylight into the middle of his audience, and bid him with no more aid than a flickering candle persuade them that he is a murdress walking in her sleep." No more aid, that is, "except Shakespeare's own words."[4]

The degree of skill here ascribed to these boy-actresses must, however, remain incredible to those who believe that, whatever their training and whatever assistance they may have received from the playwright, the boy-actresses must have been thirteen years old at the most. Alfred Harbage, for instance, once grouped together the learners and the actors of female roles in the adult companies and indicated that their

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[1] Muriel C. Bradbrook, *The Growth and Structure of Elizabethan Comedy* (London, 1955), p. 88.

[2] Ll. 17–19. Cf. Bradbrook, *Stage Conditions*, pp. 71–72.

[3] Bradbrook, *Growth and Structure*, p. 19.

[4] Ronald Watkins, *Moonlight at the Globe, An Essay in Shakespeare Production* (London, 1946), p. 14.

ages ranged only between eight and thirteen.[1] However, Marvin Rosenberg, for one, has written that the actors of female roles " were not necessarily ' boys.' They were as likely to be young men, and are sometimes so referred to in legal documents of the time."[2] A more concrete idea of the probable range in age of such male-actresses is, however, desirable.

T. W. Baldwin arbitrarily set his discussion of the ages of the boys in the adult companies within the frame of the apprentice laws, according to which, the apprentice had to serve a minimum of seven years and had to be at least twenty-four years old at the end of his apprenticeship. The beginning age " would be determined by the particular purpose for which the apprentice was to be used, and hence would vary."[3] Unfortunately, only a few indications of the usual beginning age for actor-apprentices are available. Ben Jonson's epitaph on Salathiel Pavy, however, says that that famed boy-actor was thirteen when he died and had been acting for three years. Virtually on the basis of this one fact alone, that Pavy, a member of a children's company, began acting at ten, Professor Baldwin proceeded to assign a birthdate to each boy-actor approximately ten years before his first recorded appearance and to build on these assumptions an incredibly elaborate system whereby he assigned to each possible apprentice in Shakespeare's company a characteristic " line " and, more, a long series of specified parts. Indeed, Baldwin went beyond even this to trace the supposed influence of these boy-actresses on the plays which Shakespeare and other dramatists wrote. Therefore he wrote, for instance, that " in evaluating the women the dramatist did create we must know something of the women he could create with any hope of getting her tolerably represented. Since even each principal apprentice had his own individual strong points, it is natural that Shakespeare's heroines should appear in cycles, not necessarily because Shakespeare was interested in that type of woman at that particular time but because he had the apprentice whose natural

[1] Harbage, *Rival Traditions*, p. 33.

[2] Rosenberg, 917.

[3] Baldwin, pp. 32–33.

expression was that type of woman."[1]

The Baldwin theory has not gone unchallenged. Sir Edmund Chambers has pointed out that the extremely close relationship posited between specific actors and specific roles, while undoubtedly true in a few cases, would, if applied with the thoroughness and rigidity Baldwin assumed to have been the case, have meant " re-writing if the part was assigned to a different actor at a revival."[2] S. L. Bethell, moreover, thought that Baldwin presented a choice between only two styles of acting, that built closely around an actor's natural propensity toward a certain line and that which might be termed " psychological presentation," whereas he should have at least considered a third, extremely likely style—" a more formal or conventional treatment."[3] The general contemporary view of the Baldwin theory seems to be that, as Mr. Bethell observes, " He obtains surprisingly full results, but, even granting his axioms, the working out of his thesis involves much daring and dubious speculation."[4] There has been, then, much questioning of his conclusions. More might well be done, however, in the way of questioning his axioms.

A fundamental assumption of the Baldwin theory is that actor-apprentices usually began their training about the age of ten. Davies has doubted, on general principles, that boys ever began their apprenticeships at ten, for he thought that at that age they would have been neither tall nor intelligent enough to profit by training. He thought, therefore, that it " would be an exceptional boy who was ready for training before he was twelve or thirteen."[5] Davies, however, made no attempt to utilize in any systematic way specific facts gleaned from the often infuriatingly incomplete biographical facts concerning early English actors to establish a somewhat later beginning age than ten. Such an age, once established with some degree of probability, would, needless

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[1] Baldwin, pp. 309–310.

[2] Quoted by Bradbrook, *Stage Conditions*, p. 11.

[3] Bethell, 194–196.

[4] *Ibid.*, 194.

[5] Davies, pp. 6–7.

to say, do much to make the artistic accomplishments of the boy-actresses more plausible.

Such a gathering of the mere biographical facts shows that, after all, as far as concrete evidence is concerned, Salathiel Pavy stands alone as having definitely begun his acting career at ten. Even in a field and at a time when birthdates can rarely be assigned, there arises, therefore, some doubt about Professor Baldwin's assumption that ten was a general starting age. Wallace believed, for instance, that it was likely that the eight Blackfriars boys named in the famous Clifton complaint of 1600 were " from nine to thirteen years of age " at the time of their impressment.[1] Such a range, chiefly reaching upward from ten, is indeed probable. Even John Page, who was probably born on August 6, 1615, was possibly eleven rather than ten when he made his first acting appearance in 1626.[2] We know that Nathan Field was baptized on October 17, 1587, and remained a scholar at St. Paul's Grammar School until at least 1600; not earlier than 1600 was he " impressed by Nathaniel Giles and his deputies to serve as one of the Children of the Chapel."[3] Baldwin, in order to substantiate his postulated starting age, assumed that Field had been kidnapped about 1597,[4] but if one proceeds on the basis of actual records rather than on the basis of speculation, Field, born in 1587, made his first appearance as an actor in 1600, at the age not of ten but of thirteen.

The case of John Honyman raises other doubts. He was baptized on February 7, 1612. Baldwin has him first mentioned as an actor in 1623,[5] but the more careful and conservative Bentley terms Baldwin's reconstruction of Honyman's career " badly askew " and dates Honyman's first appearance as 1626, when he was thirteen or fourteen.[6] Nicholas Birch was " born not before the autumn of 1619, but was with

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[1] Wallace, 76.
[2] Bentley, II, 518.
[3] Chambers, II, 316–318.
[4] Baldwin, pp. 33–34.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[6] Bentley, II, 476–477.

the company by the summer 1631," Baldwin himself wrote;[1] Birch was, therefore, possibly twelve at his first appearance. Similarly, Alexander Goffe was baptized on August 7, 1614, and had his first recorded part in October, 1626, when he also was twelve.[2] Another apprentice, Ezekiel Fenn, was probably born on April 9, 1620, and played his first recorded part in 1635, when he was fourteen or fifteen.[3]

It is true that these apprentices may have been with the company before their first recorded appearances. A beginning age, at least for many boys, later than ten is nevertheless indicated. Moreover, more significant than the specific age at which the apprentices began is that age at which they stopped acting feminine roles. It is certain that the boy-actresses continued beyond the limit of thirteen which Harbage indicated, especially if it is true, as Davies believed, that " the parts of old women were played by men, who might double them with a male character, if the play permitted it."[4] However, it is likely that Ashley Thorndike was carried to the opposite extreme when he spoke of boys who were kept " playing women from the age of twelve until they had passed to middle age " and then compared these actors specifically to the fully mature female impersonators of the Japanese stage.[5] Here again a new search of the available biographical data yields some interesting results.

The length of the careers of those in the children's companies was presumably quite short. Several of the Blackfriars boys may indeed have remained with the company until their young manhood. Professor Harbage called attention to the fact, for example, that Nathan Field " was still with the company . . . when in his early twenties " and also that Marston had referred to the company as " youths."[6] It is also true that in 1602 it was reported that the Dowager Countess of Leicester

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[1] Baldwin, p. 35.
[2] Bentley, II, 446–447.
[3] *Ibid.*, 433–434.
[4] Davies, p. 140.
[5] Thorndike, pp. 373–374.
[6] Harbage, *Rival Traditions*, 43'

had married " one of the playing boyes of the chappell."[1] However, it is likely that most of these boys ended their careers with the boy-companies when their voices broke. In Hamlet's remarks, Wallace believed, " it is warrantably assumed that these Chapel Boys will be continued at the theatre as actors only so long as they can sing."[2] Hillebrand, in another extensive study of the boy-companies, agreed with Wallace in setting the usual maximum age at about fifteen, after which the boys were usually well provided for with positions at one of the universities, at court, or at a similar institution.[3] As correlating evidence it may be noted that when Philip Julius, Duke of Stettin-Pomerania, Prussia, visited the Blackfriars Theatre in September, 1602, a member of his retinue, Frederick Gerschow, spoke in his diary of the company as a " number of young boys who are required to devote themselves earnestly to the art of singing." Indeed, Gerschow was most impressed with one boy who " sang so charmingly to the accompaniment of a base-viol that unless possibly the nuns at Milan may have excelled him, we have not heard his equal on our journey."[4] Nathan Field was, then, probably an exception in that he continued to act with the boy-companies until he was about twenty.

Many of the boy-actresses of the adult companies, however, seem to have acted feminine roles over a substantial period of time, although Chambers and Davies may possibly be correct in estimating the usual length of service at only " two or three years."[5] Davies correlated the upper age limit of a male-actress in an adult company with the final breaking of a boy's voice. He pointed out, however, the neglected fact that " Careful training will preserve almost any boy's voice unbroken for speaking until the age of seventeen "[6] and elsewhere quoted an expert on Elizabethan and Jacobean music, Mr. Cuthbert Kelly, to the

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[1] Quoted by Chambers, II, 48.
[2] Wallace, 180.
[3] Hillebrand, 43.
[4] Quoted by Wallace, 220–221.
[5] Davies, p. 6.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

effect " that the boy actors would be able to preserve their voices for singing until sixteen at least, and for speaking until nineteen or twenty."[1] In support of these observations it may be mentioned that Alexander Goffe is known to have acted female parts from 1626, when he was twelve, to at least 1632, when he was eighteen.[2] Similarly, William Trigg acted such roles over the same six-year period at least.[3]

T. W. Baldwin recognized that some such long acting careers must have been usual, for he pointed to twenty-one as the most likely age at which apprentices were released from the terms of their apprenticeship and thus excused from further acting of women's parts. " In the companies of men where these apprentices acted only the parts of women, there would be no point in keeping them till the full legal age of twenty-four, since they would ordinarily have lost their feminine charm some years before."[4] Some concrete biographical facts concerning the boy-actresses indicate, however, that the age at which the boy-actresses stopped was as flexible as that at which they began. Baldwin's " ten-to-twenty-one " career emerges as much too rigid.

Theophilus Bird, or Bourne, for instance, acted as the " Queene of Fesse " in Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West, Part II* about 1630, at which time he was twenty-two years of age. It was not until his twenty-seventh year that he was listed for a male part,[5] and even then Baldwin, he who postulated the age of twenty-one as the normal upper limit of female impersonation, credited him with a feminine role.[6] Similarly, his father, William Birde, or Bourne, continued to play female parts even after he became a shareholder in the Lord Admiral's Company, " the second dramatic company in the kingdom." He " was probably master of a good falsetto voice," Murray guessed, " and so was enabled to continue acting female parts after he reached manhood."[7]

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[1] Davies, pp. 35–36.
[2] Bentley, II, 446–447.
[3] Bentley, II, 604–606.
[4] Baldwin, p. 36.
[5] Bentley, II, 377–379.
[6] Baldwin, p. 36.
[7] John Tucker Murray, *English Dramatic Companies*, 1558–1642 (London, 1910),

Both Professor Baldwin and Professor Bentley have agreed that Richard Sharpe was born in either 1602 or 1603 and that he played feminine roles until about 1623, at which time he would have been twenty or twenty-one.[1] John Thompson of the King's Company may also be mentioned here. Although the date of his birth is unknown, he clearly acted female roles from at least 1621, when he was Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, until 1631, when he played Panopia, the King's sister, in the Blackfriars production of Wilson's *The Swisser*. If we presume that an apprentice, even if he was articled at ten, would not have been assigned a part even as important as that of Julia in his very first years, we may assume that Thompson was at least twelve in 1621, by which token he would have been twenty-two in 1631. Perhaps more significant, the eldest of his two daughters was born before November, 1631, the same year in which he was definitely impersonating a woman.[2]

We know that Alexander Cooke was married by October of 1603 and also that he acted in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* in 1603 and his *Volpone* in 1605. Although we do not know definitely the parts he played in these two plays, yet his "name occupies such a place, in the list of performers at the end of each, as to make it probable that he was Agrippina in the tragedy, and Fine-Madam Would-Be in the comedy."[3] Cooke, then, was in all likelihood acting feminine parts two years after his marriage, a supposition reinforced by the fact that later, in 1610, on the *Alchemist* actors' list, and in 1611, on the list for *Cataline*, he was listed fourth and second respectively, rather than last, as he had been for both *Sejanus* and *Volpone*.[4] We may suppose, therefore, that he graduated to male parts in the interval. James Horne's case is even more noteworthy. We know that he was married in December, 1615,

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I, 134. See also *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. Walter W. Greg (London, 1908), I, 69; II, 241–243.

[1] Baldwin, pp. 219–221; Bentley, II, 569–571.

[2] Bentley, II, 599–600.

[3] J. Payne Collier, *Memoirs of the Principal Actors in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London, 1846), pp. 182–183.

[4] *Ibid.*

and yet in 1628, thirteen years later, he was listed fifteenth in the King's Company cast for *The Lover's Melancholy;* "the roles are not given," admitted Bentley, "but the position of his name indicates that he took a woman's part."[1]

Also worth mentioning in this connection are those actors definitely known to have acted roles in which a man disguised himself as a woman as a part of the plot. Nathan Field has sometimes been taken to have played the title role in Jonson's *Epicoene, or the Silent Woman* of 1609, in which year he would have been twenty-two.[2] This assignment is probably incorrect, however, especially since not only are no roles assigned in the actors' list for that play, but also Field is listed first, a postion which more probably indicates that he played the leading completely male part rather than the title-role. It is, however, certain that, two years later, in 1611, when he was twenty-four, Field was the recipient of verses from Chapman which averred: "To many forms as well as many ways / Thy active muse turns like thy acted woman,"[3] an indication that he had acted at least partially-feminine roles not too long before at any rate. It is thus very possible that Professor Baldwin was correct in reconciling the seemingly conflicting testimony of Malone and Collier by surmising that Field, at twenty-nine, acted the part of Wittipol in Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) and the part of Young Archas two years later, in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Loyal Subject.* Baldwin wrote, "Malone states that Field acted the parts of women with the Shakespearean company, in contradicting whom Collier takes particular pains in his biography of Field to state that he was too old to take such parts when he came to the company. It would seem therefore that Collier is right in that Field was too old to be a regular lady; but that Malone is right in that Field did on occasion disguise as a woman."[4]

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[1] Bentley, II, 479.

[2] Felix E. Schelling, *The Queen's Progress, and Other Elizabethan Sketches* (London, 1904), p. 118. See also Nairn, 75.

[3] Quoted by Frederick Gard Fleay, *A Biographical Chronicle of the English Drama, 1559–1642* (London, 1891), I, 171.

[4] Baldwin, p. 207. See also Collier, p. 268.

Somewhat parallel is the career of Augustine Phillips, who married in March, 1588, and who four years thereafter, in 1592, took " the part of the effeminate young Sardanapolus . . . , appearing in woman's dress."[1]

As has been mentioned above, John Shank was assigned the feminine role of Petella in the revival of *The Wild Goose Chase* in 1632, at least twenty-two years after his marriage. This appearance seems, indeed, to have been an unusual one, and Shank probably cannot properly be listed in the ranks of the male-actresses. For one thing, Petella has no spoken lines. Baldwin thought Shank's Petella was " probably impromptu, the assignment being only to get him on stage, almost certainly that he might coach the merry actors of Rosalina and Lelia-Bianca."[2] Bentley has disagreed with this theory, pointing out that each of the apprentices whom Shank was presumably attending, William Trigg and Alexander Gough, " had had at least six years' experience in the company. It is more probable that Shank was allowed to gag his lines, since the character has little real function in the play."[3] Whatever the specific reasons for Shank's appearance in this role, however, the incident demonstrates that the appearance of a fully-mature man in a feminine role, even if only for comic purposes, was acceptable to the audiences of 1632.

Further indications of male-actresses often being mature men is furnished by the records of the first years after the Restoration, although it must be admitted at the outset that the early Restoration theatre was probably forced to use whatever male-actresses it could obtain, regardless of their age, after the long closing of the playhouses had prevented younger boys from being trained. This very excuse is, in fact, employed in a prologue delivered before a now-unknown play acted before King Charles II " very soon after his Restoration ":

> we are sorry
> We should this night attend on so much glory
> With such weak worth; or your clear sight engage

[1] Baldwin, pp. 79–80; Murray, I, 79.

[2] Baldwin, p. 188.

[3] Bentley, II, 562–563.

To view the remnants of a ruin'd stage:
For doubting we should never play again,
We have play'd all our women into men;
That are of such large size for flesh and bones,
They'll rather be taken for amazons
Than tender maids.[1]

Thomas Jordon, in another prologue to the King, this one dated August 16, 1660, spoke of "our large siz'd Ladies" who had been annoyed by police action during the preceding years and had been "torn by the throats / And like Wine Porters put in petty-coats / Dragg'd to the Muse for plotters."[2] The most famous such prologue is, however, that second one by Thomas Jordan which was written "to introduce the first woman that came to act on the stage," on December 8, 1660.[3] The play that night was *Othello*. The identity of her who played Desdemona is yet unknown, although she was probably either Mrs. Margaret Hughes or Mrs. Saunderson. At any rate, the prologue says, in part:

I come, unknown to any of the rest,
To tell you news; I saw the lady drest:
The woman plays to-day: mistake me not,
No man in gown, or page in petticoat:
A woman to my knowledge; yet I can't,
If I should die, make affidavit on't.
. . . . . .
In this reforming age
We have intents to civilize the stage.
Our women are defective, and so siz'd,
You'd think they were some of the guard disguis'd:
For, to speak truth, men act, that are between
Forty and fifty, wenches of fifteen;

[1] Quoted by Malone, III, 130.

[2] Quoted by Bentley, II, 489.

[3] This was the first *English* women to appear on the *public* stage, strictly speaking. In 1629 a troupe of French players, including women actresses, acted in London and were a prime target for William Prynne's vehement Puritan attacks in *Histriomastix*. Also, Mrs. Edward Coleman acted Ianthe in a private presentation of D'Avenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* in 1656. See Helen McAfee, *Pepys on the Restoration Stage* (New Haven, 1916), p. 257.

With bone so large, and nerve so incompliant,
When you call Desdemona, enter Giant. . . .[1]

Jordan here wrote that men of between forty and fifty years of age were acting girls of fifteen. We know certainly of no actors of so advanced an age, but such a situation was by no means impossible. A male-actress who had been twenty-one at the closing of the theatres in 1642 would have been thirty-nine in 1660, for instance, and the Restoration theatre must have had to utilize some of these former boy-actresses until the introduction of women into women's roles was fully accomplished. Michael Mohun, for example, was one of these men. He acted the feminine role of Bellamente in Shirley's *Love Cruelty* both before 1637 and after 1660, indicating an age of at least thirty-three for his later appearance as a woman.[2] Even Edward Kynaston was probably born about 1640 and yet is not recorded as having acted male roles before 1663, when he was twenty-three at least. Indeed, it is with Kynaston that Colley Cibber coupled a celebrated anecdote which can illustrate the age of early Restoration male-actresses.

> The king coming a little before his usual time to a tragedy, found the actors not ready to begin, when his majesty, not chusing to have as much patience as his good subjects, sent to them, to know the meaning of it; upon which the master of the company came to the box, and rightly judging that the best excuse for their default, would be the true one, fairly told his majesty, that the *Queen* was not shaved yet. The king, whose good humour loved to laugh at a jest, as well as to make one, accepted the excuse, which served to divert him, till the male queen could be effeminated.[3]

Whatever the specific age at which boy-actresses in the adult companies may have stopped acting feminine roles, it is of central importance to realize that such boys often acted such roles over a long period of years and often, indeed, continued to do so into their early twenties at least. Once this fact is established, the achievement of a high artistic level by

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[1] Quoted by Malone, III, 128–129.

[2] James Wright, "Historia Histrionica, The Second Generation of English Professional Actors, 1625–1670," *Social England Illustrated* (Westminster, 1903), p. 423.

[3] Cibber, p. 123.

these boy-actresses becomes more plausible. Their initial training and the practice obtained over relatively long careers aided these young men. The playwrights aided them, to some extent. Their natural charm aided them. A certain formality in acting methods aided them. And yet, when all this has been said, theirs remains a most impressive achievement.

The days of the English boy-actress are undoubtedly gone forever. A theatre-going public accustomed to Katherine Hepburn as Rosalind or as Beatrice, to Eileen Herlie as Gertrude or as Paulina, is not likely to be willing to return to an acceptance of boy-actresses, however good, in their stead. It may well also be true, as Davies has maintained, that playwrights have by now become so accustomed to the presence of women actors and have accordingly moved so far in the direction of feminine vigor and of naturalism in general that real women are now imperative. If, as Davies has insisted, a real woman is necessary to act Hedda Gabbler or Mrs. Alving,[2] it seems equally clear that nothing but a real woman will do for Blanche du Bois or for Maggie the Cat.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that Shakespeare did somehow make do with a boy for his Cleopatra and his Viola, just as Webster, as another instance, did make do with one for his Duchess of Malfi or his Vittoria Corombona. The modern student wonders how it could ever have been done. Davies approached the subject by considering the methods by which one playwright adapted his feminine characterizations to the boy-actresses. This paper, while utilizing some of Davies's suggestions, has yet attempted to approach the boy-actresses from a more positive point of view. It has, therefore, attempted not only to estimate the boys' level of achievement but also to ascertain what qualities, both inherent and acquired, the boys were able to contribute to the attainment of that high level of artistic excellence. The boy-actor, whether he acted the parts of men or of women, whether he acted in a children's or an adults' company, practiced an effective art, but as a boy-actress he had his finest hours.

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[1] Davies, p. 198.

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